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AUTOMATIC FORMS HANDLING SYSTEM

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates generally to the field of network-based application services and, more particularly, to an automatic forms handling system configured to automatically create a database schema corresponding to a received form, publish the form for data submissions, record the data submissions in the database table or other database structure, and produce reports based on the data stored in the table.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Many types of data-entry forms are used for a wide variety of applications. In this context, a "form" is a document that includes one or more structured data submission fields that a user may fill in with data entries to create a form submission. Common examples include political polling surveys, consumer preference surveys, order forms for goods and services, warranty cards, employment applications, and so forth. The reliance on form-based data handling is on the rise due in large part to the increasing popularity of the Internet and other forms of on-line communication. This is because data-entry forms are a convenient way for conducting structured on-line communications designed to solicit and accumulate data entries in response to specific written inquiries.

On-line data-entry forms are usually a lower-cost alternative to other methods for conducting structured communications, such as direct mail solicitation, telephone interviews, and in-person interviews. For this reason, many companies and individuals are turning to on-line data-entry forms to replace structured communications that were previously conducted through other media. In addition, many entities are finding new applications for on-line data-entry forms, such as gathering electronic marketing data, bill presentation and payment systems, insurance claims submission, census taking, absentee ballot collection, on-line shopping, meeting scheduling, shareholder balloting, and countless other applications.

Although on-line data-entry forms are often a lower-cost alternative to other types of structured communications, forms present their own challenges to the form publisher. In fact, the proliferation of applications using on-line data-entry forms, and the proliferation of large-scale forms systems in particular, has revealed a number of difficult challenges for forms administration. First, the form itself must be created. Although many word processing and publication application programs may be used to create data-entry forms, a form designer requires time and experience to develop a talent for skillful form design.

Second, a database file must usually be designed to accumulate data entries received through form submissions. Again, although many suitable database application programs are available, the form designer must become skillful in operation of the database application, and the coordination of the database files with the data-entry forms. Similarly, a report is typically required to present the accumulated data entries in a meaningful way. And again, the form designer must become skillful in the development of effective report formats, and in the coordination of the database files with the report formats.

A significant investment in computer hardware and software may also be required to implement a forms system. As noted above, an application program for creating the forms, a database application program, and an application program for

creating the reports are typically required. In addition, sufficient computer memory is required to store the forms, the submissions, and the related reports. One of the challenges may often be the maintenance of sufficient communication bandwidth to ensure that visitors to the forms server can access the forms and enter a form submission in a reasonable amount of time. This is particularly important for voluntary submission systems, such as e-commerce and marketing survey applications, because consumers have little patience for failed attempts to access a forms server.

As a result, a significant investment in hardware, software, and training is typically required to successfully deploy even a small to medium sized forms application. Many entities will inevitably over-design or under-design their forms systems, resulting in inefficient systems and lost opportunities. Some entities may not have sufficient investment capital available to install a suitable forms systems, and others will lose valuable business opportunities while their forms systems are being configured and deployed. In addition, the installation of an individual forms system for every entity that elects to install a forms system will proliferate the number of small to medium sized forms systems, which will avoid an economy of scale that could be attained through a centralized forms administration system.

Thus, there is a need in the art for a method and system for improved forms administration. Specifically, there is a need for a system that overcomes the need for a significant investment in hardware, software, and training that is presently required to successfully deploy a forms application.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention meets the needs described above in a centralized, network-based automatic forms handling system. The system includes all of the application software needed to create a forms system, including a forms wizard that can be used to create forms, a reports wizard that can be used to create reports, and a database application program that can be used to house the forms, the

submissions, and the reports. The forms handling system also includes sufficient hardware and communication resources for a large number of forms systems. This allows many users to share the hardware and software resources of the centralized, network-based automatic forms handling system without having to invest in
5 duplicative resources on their respective client ends. Thus, the subject invention overcomes the need for an individual form publisher to undertake a significant investment in hardware, software, and training before deploying a forms application.

The automatic forms handling system is also configured to automatically create a database table for a corresponding form. Thus, the forms publisher may simply
10 upload an existing form without having any knowledge or skill of the infrastructure needed to administer the form. The form publisher may also specify service definitions specifying form logic, instructions for processing form submissions, and instructions for periodically generating and delivering reports. This gives even the most unsophisticated form publisher the ability to easily and quickly design and
15 deploy a highly sophisticated forms system using only a thin client application program, such as a browser.

The automatic forms handling system also presents form publishers with a number of other advantages, including the ability to upload forms in a variety of formats, such as HTML, XML, PDF, and word processing formats. The forms
20 handling system may also receive communications from form publishers and visitors through a variety of communication devices, including computers, landline telephones, wireless telephones, and digital broadband devices. In addition, the forms handling system allows the form publisher to screen individual form submissions, if desired, before the form submissions are entered into the
25 corresponding database table. The publisher may also specify a variety of destinations for reports, including storage in a specified location on the forms handling system, e-mail delivery, or hard copy delivery to a specified location. The form publisher may also update the forms and associated reports from time to time.

Many other advantages and useful techniques for implementing a forms system using the subject invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art.

Generally described, the invention includes a method and system for handling forms. The forms handling system receives a form from a form publisher. This form
5 includes one or more data submission fields configured to receive user input. The forms handling system processes the form to identify the data submission fields and correlating each data field to a database field type supported by a database application. The forms handling system then creates database tables or other database structures in the database application corresponding to the form. This
10 database table or structure includes a storage element, such as a column in the table, corresponding to each data submission field. The forms handling system then publishes the form to receive form submissions including data entries into the data submission fields of the form. The forms handling system receives one or more form submissions from visitors accessing the forms system. The forms handling system
15 enters the data entries of the form submissions into the corresponding storage elements of the database structure.

In addition, the forms handling system typically receives a report file associated with the form. This report file includes report elements associated with the storage elements of the database. Periodically and in accordance with service definitions
20 received from the form publisher, the forms handling system computes the report elements from the data entries associated with the storage elements of the database structure, renders the report, and delivers the report to a specified location. The form may be uploaded from a remote form publisher, or the form may be created on-line using a forms wizard provided by the forms handling system. Similarly, the
25 corresponding report may be uploaded from a remote form publisher, or the report may be created on-line using a reports wizard provided by the forms handling system.

More specifically described, the forms handling system processes the form to identify the data submission fields by parsing the form to identify the data submission fields, determining a field type associated with each data submission field; and

determining a name associated with each data submission field. The forms handling system then looks up a selected database field type corresponding to each data submission field, and correlates each data submission field with its corresponding selected database field type. In particular, the forms handling system typically looks up a default database field type and a list of database field type options corresponding to each data submission field, and then prompts the form publisher to enter a selected database field type from the list of database field type options for each data submission field. If the publisher does not make a selection, the forms handling system assigns the default database field type to the corresponding form data submission field.

As an optional feature, the forms handling system may forward each form submissions to the form publisher for review without entering the submission into the corresponding database table. The forms handling system may subsequently receive approval of a particular form submission from the form publisher, and enter that form submission into the corresponding storage elements of the database .

The forms handling system may also receive form logic defining conditions associated with the receipt of form submissions using the form. The forms handling system saves the form logic in association with the database table or other structure corresponding to the form, and applies the form logic when receiving form submissions using the form. The form logic typically includes conditions defining valid data entries for individual data submission fields, and conditions defining a valid form submission based on a combination of data entries for several data submission fields.

Turning to a typical software architecture for the subject invention, the forms handling system includes a document handler that receives forms and associated report files. The forms handling system also includes a forms database that stores forms received through the document handler, and a reports database that stores reports received through the document handler. The forms handling system also includes a table loader that creates a database table or other structure corresponding to each form, and a forms manager that receives one or more form submissions

associated with each form and enters data entries received through each form submission into the corresponding database. The forms manager also receives a service definition associated with each form, and produces and delivers reports for a form in accordance with instructions contained in a corresponding service definition.

5 The forms handling system also includes an interface system operable for receiving service definitions from communication devices, such as landline telephones, wireless telephones, computers, and digital broadband devices. The document handler can process a variety of document types, such as HTML documents, PDF documents, XML documents, and various types of word processing
10 documents.

That the invention improves over the drawbacks of prior forms administration systems and accomplishes the advantages described above will become apparent from the following detailed description of embodiments of the subject invention and the appended drawings and claims.

15 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a functional block diagram illustrating an automatic forms handling system.

FIG. 2 illustrates data-entry form and an associated form submission.

20 FIG. 3 illustrates a database structure, a table in this example, including a record corresponding to the form submission illustrated in FIG. 2.

FIG. 4 illustrates a report file corresponding to the form illustrated in FIG. 2 and the database table illustrated in FIG. 3.

25 FIG. 5 is a functional block diagram illustrating typical software architecture for the forms engine of an automatic forms handling system.

FIG. 6 is a logic flow diagram illustrating an auto-forms routine for an automatic forms handling system.

FIG. 7A is a logic flow diagram illustrating a form creation routine for an automatic forms handling system.

FIG. 7B illustrates a correlation table for associating form field types with database field types in an automatic forms handling system.

FIG. 8 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a report creation routine for an automatic forms handling system.

5 FIG. 9 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a service definition routine for an automatic forms handling system.

FIG. 10 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a submission handling routine for an automatic forms handling system.

10 FIG. 11 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a submission processing routine for an automatic forms handling system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

25 The invention is preferably implemented as an automatic forms handling application service provided on a global computer network, such as the Internet. A form publisher submits a form and an associated report to the forms handling system. The form includes one or more data submission fields for accumulating data entries submitted into the form by visitors to the forms handling system. The report includes report elements for returning tabulated data entries accumulated using the form. The forms handling system automatically creates a database table or other structure
30 corresponding to the form, and correlates each form submission field with a database storage element, such as a column in the database table, that accumulate data entries for its associated form submission field. The forms handling system also coordinates the database table with the associated report file, and generates and delivers reports periodically or on demand to the a specified location in accordance a
35 service definition provided by the form publisher. Reports can be viewed simply by clicking on the link in the report menu or by opening specific URL.

The service definition provided by the form publisher may also include form logic for the various data submission fields, such as data types and ranges. The service definition may also include form logic for a valid form submission, such as

required fields. The service definition may also specify special submission handling instructions, such as an instruction to e-mail each submission to the form publisher for review before entering the submissions into the database table or other database structure. These form service definitions may be conveniently saved as metadata associated with the corresponding database table. Optionally, the form handling system may perform other services for the form publisher, such as archiving form records, providing professional advice or services in the construction of forms and reports, and advertising the availability of the forms for submissions.

Although the subject invention is preferably deployed on the Internet, it may also be deployed on other computer networks, such as intranets, LAN, WAN, WAP, and other network systems. Typically, form publishers access the forms handling system using a thin client, such as a browser. Form publishers can upload forms and reports created in a variety of formats, including HTML, XML, PDF and word processing formats. Alternatively, form publishers may design their forms and associated reports on-line using a forms wizard and a reports wizard provided by the forms handling system. However, the forms handling system is not limited to the document formats listed above. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the forms handling system may support other document formats using the techniques described in this specification.

The forms handling system also supports a variety of user communication devices, such as telephones, computers, digital broadband devices, and so forth. Again, the forms handling system is not limited to the user communication device listed above. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the forms handling system may support other user communication device using the techniques described in this specification. Similarly, the software architecture for the illustrative embodiment includes a forms manager, a document handler, and table loader, a database application, a word processing application, and an interface system. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the forms handling system may be implemented in a

different software architecture that performs the functions described in this specification.

With respect to the business aspects of the subject invention, the forms handling system may generate revenue through a variety of fee techniques. For example, form publishers may pay a fee for each form published, each report received, or each submission handled. Form publishers may also obtain optional services on a fee basis, such as use of the forms and reports wizards, or use of professional services for forms or report design. Furthermore, customers will need to access the forms on the forms handling system's server. Therefore, the form's handling system will have to assign URL based location identifiers to enable the customers to locate the form. Some URL based location identifiers will be more desirable than others. The forms handling system may charge a higher fee for these more desirable URL based location identifiers. In some cases, visitors entering form submissions may be charged a fee on a per-submission basis. Advertising revenues may also be generated through the sale of banner add space, and referral revenues may be generated through referral link charges. In addition, the forms handling system will accumulate a large store of information relating to the users of the forms handling system. This information store may be made available to advertisers or other interested parties on a fee basis. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that other business models may be implemented in association with the forms handling system.

Turning now to the figures, in which like numerals indicate like elements throughout the several figures, FIG. 1 is a functional block diagram of an automatic forms handling system 10. The server side of the forms handling system 10 includes a forms engine 12, a database of published forms 14, a database of reports 16, and a database of tables 18. In this system, each published form in the database 14 has a corresponding report in the database 16, and a corresponding table in the database 18. Specifically, a published form includes one or submission fields for receiving data entries from visitors entering form submissions. The corresponding database table

accumulates the form submissions received through its associated form. And the corresponding report includes report entries based on the data in the table that present the accumulated data in a meaningful way.

A communication network **20** connects the forms engine **12** with form publishers **22** and visitors **24**. Many different form publishers may publish forms through the forms engine **12**, and a larger number of visitors may enter form submissions into the published forms **14**. A form publisher accesses the forms engine **12** via the communication network **20** and submits a form specification **26** and a report specification **28**. The form and associated report may be uploaded or defined on-line using a forms wizard **120** (see Fig. 5) and a reports wizard **122** (see Fig. 5). The forms engine **12** automatically creates the table in the database **18**, and correlates the data submission fields in the form to storage elements in the table, such as columns. The forms engine **12** also correlates the storage elements in the table to the corresponding report elements in the associated report. The forms engine **12** then published the form in the database **14** for the receipt of forms submissions **30** from visitors **24**.

The forms publisher **22** also submits a service definition **29** to the forms engine **12**. The service definition **29** includes instructions for periodically rendering a compiled report **26** and delivering the report to a specified location. For example, the compiled report **26** may be e-mailed to the form publisher, stored in the database **16** for access by the form publisher, printed in hard copy and mailed to a specified locations, or handles in any other manner specified by the form publisher. The service definition **29** also includes form logic to be implemented by the forms engine **12** when receiving forms submissions into the corresponding forms. For example, form logic may include required fields for a valid submission and data types and ranges for individual data entries. The service definition **29** may also include instructions for handling form submissions. For example, the form publisher may instruct the forms engine **12** to e-mail all form submissions to the form publisher for

review and approval before entering the submissions into the corresponding database table.

FIG. 2 illustrates data-entry form **40** and an associated form submission. Specifically, this illustrative Form “A” is an automobile questionnaire. The form **40** includes five structured data inquiries: an “Annual Income” data inquiry **42**, a “Number in Household” data inquiry **44**, an “Annual Miles Driven” data inquiry **46**, a “Type of Automobile” data inquiry **48**, and an “Age of Automobile” data inquiry **50**. The “Annual Income” data inquiry **42** has an associated data submission field **52**, the “Number in Household” data inquiry **44** has an associated data submission field **54**, the “Annual Miles Driven” data inquiry **46** has an associated data submission field **56**, the “Type of automobile” data inquiry **48** has an associated data submission field **58**, and the “Age of Automobile” data inquiry **50** has an associated data submission field **60**.

FIG. 2 also illustrates a typical form submission **62** that a visitor might enter using the form **40**. In this example, the visitor has entered “50,000” as a data entry into the data submission field **52**, the data entry “4” into the data submission field **54**, the data entry “16,000” into the data submission field **56**, the data entry “SEDAN” into the data submission field **58**, and the data entry “1.5-2.0” into the data submission field **60**. It will be understood that the form **40** could include a wide variety of data submission fields, such as buttons, check boxes, pick lists, character fields, text fields, date-time fields and others.

FIG. 3 illustrates a database table **63** that includes a record **74** corresponding to the form submission **62** illustrated in FIG. 2. The table **63** includes a storage element, in this example a column, corresponding to each data submission field in the forms **40**. Specifically, the storage element **64** corresponds to the data submission field **52**, the storage element **66** corresponds to the data submission field **54**, the storage element **68** corresponds to the data submission field **56**, the storage element **70** corresponds to the data submission field **58**, and the storage element **72** corresponds to the data submission field **60**. In this format, each form submission

corresponds to a record stored as a row in the table **63**. For example, the form submission **62** shown in FIG. 2 is stored as the record in the row **74** in the table **63**. Similarly, a second form submission may be stored as a record in the row **76**, another form submission may be stored as a record in the row **78**, and so forth.

5 FIG. 4 illustrates a report file **80** corresponding to the form **40** illustrated in FIG. 2 and the database table **63** illustrated in FIG. 3. In this illustration, a first report table **82** is compiled for sedan owners, a second report table **84** is compiled for sports car owners, and a third report table **86** is compiled for minivan owners. As a simple example, the report table **82** includes the entry "75,000" which represents the average
10 annual income of sedan owners represented in the database table **63**. Similarly, the report includes the entry "4.5" which represents the average household size for sedan owners, the entry "12,236" which represents the average annual miles driven for sedan owners, and the entry "3.6" which represents the average automobile age in years for sedan owners. All of these report entries are computed from the data
15 entries tabulated in the database table **63**. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that many other report files may be defined, including sophisticated reports that include statistical grouping analyses, graphical data representations, animations, and so forth.

FIG. 5 is a functional block diagram illustrating a typical software architecture for the forms engine **12**. The forms engine **12** includes a forms manager **102**, a
20 document handler **104**, a table loader **106**, a database application program **108**, a library of one or more word processing and desktop publishing application programs **110**, and an interface system **112**. Basically, the forms manager **102** controls the operation of the forms engine **12** including the implementation of service definitions, the document handler **104** controls the uploading and creation of forms and reports,
25 the table loader **106** creates a database table to correlate received forms and associated reports, the database application program **108** provides the software infrastructure for database maintenance, the library of word processing and desktop publishing application programs **110** provides the software infrastructure for forms and report maintenance, and the interface system **112** allows users, such as forms

publishers and visitors entering form submissions, to access the forms engine **12** using a variety of different communication devices.

Specifically, the document handler **104** includes a forms wizard **120**, a reports wizard **122**, a forms uploader **124**, and a reports uploader **126**. The forms wizard **120** is an menu-driven utility designed to help users create forms. The forms wizard **120** typically includes a number of "canned" forms and an easy-to-use interface for creating forms. Similarly, the reports wizard **122** includes a number of "canned" report formats and an easy-to-use interface for creating reports. The reports wizard **122** also allows the form publisher to describe the relationships between the various data submission fields in a form and the report elements in the associated report. Additional details relating to specific operation of document wizards are well known those skilled in the art and will not be further described in this specification.

The forms uploader **124** typically includes a number of data conversion utilities for translating forms received in a variety of formats into a format supported by the library of word processing and desktop publishing application programs **110**. These application programs are used to publish the forms on the server side of the forms handling system **10**. For example, the library **110** may include an HTML application program (e.g., browser), a PDF application program (e.g., ADOBE ILLUSTRATOR), an MS WORD application program, a WORDPERFECT application program, and so forth. Similarly, the reports uploader **126** includes a number of data conversion utilities for translating reports received in a variety of formats into a format supported by the library of word processing or desktop publishing application programs **110**. The reports uploader **126** also allows the form publisher to describe the relationships between the various data submission fields in a form and the report elements in the associated report. Alternatively, the forms engine **12** may include additional application programs to avoid the need to convert forms and reports into a compatible form. Additional details relating to specific operation of document uploaders are well known those skilled in the art and will not be further described in this specification.

The table loader **106** includes a processor for each document format represented in the library of word processing and desktop processing application programs **110**. For example, the table loader **106** typically includes an HTML processor **130**, a PDF processor **132**, an MS WORD processor **134**, a WORDPERFECT processor **134**, and so forth. It should be noted that the table uploader **106** may include a single processor if the document handler **104** converts all supported document types into a single format. In this case, the library **110** would include a single word processing or desktop processing application program. On the other hand, the table loader **106** requires multiple processors if the library **110** includes multiple word processing or desktop processing application programs. This configuration may be preferred because it allows the forms engine **12** to support multiple document formats without document conversion.

Each processor in the table loader **106** operates analogously for its respective document format. Specifically, each processor includes a look-up table correlating each possible data submission field type in a form supported by the processor (i.e., a form created using the corresponding application in the library **110**) to a database field type supported by the database application program **108**. This look-up table is created in advance and stored in association with the processor. To create a database table corresponding to a particular form, the processor parses the form to identify the names and field types for the data submission fields. The processor then looks up the corresponding database field type for each data submission field.

Alternatively, the look-up table may include a default database field type and a list of database field type options for each data submission field type. In this case, the processor prompts the form publisher to select a database field type from the options listed in the look-up table for each data submission field. If the user fails to select an option for a particular data submission field, the processor assigns the associated default database field type to that data submission field. The processor then renders a database table for the corresponding form, receives form logic from the publisher and enters this logic into the table as metadata, and receives filler data

and populates the storage elements of the table with the filler data. The technique described above may be used to operate a processor in the table loader **106** for each word processing and desktop publishing program in the library **110**.

The interface system **112** typically includes menu-driven voice or text recognition system configured to exchange data with a variety of user communication devices **114**. For example, the interface system **112** typically includes a voice interface **140** configured to receive voice and DTMF data from a landline telephone, an e-mail interface **142** configured to receive text data and enclosed documents from a computer, an Internet interface **144** configured to receive HTML and XML data from a computer or digital broadband device, and a wireless interface **146** configured to receive voice, DTMF and overhead-channel data from a wireless communication device. Other types of interfaces may also be included to exchange data with other types of communication devices. Additional details relating to specific operation of data interfaces are well known those skilled in the art and will not be further described in this specification.

FIG. 6 is a logic flow diagram illustrating an auto-forms routine **600** for the automatic forms handling system **10**. Routine **600** is typically implemented by the forms engine **12**. In routine **602**, the forms engine **12** creates forms for publication in connection with the forms handling system **10**. That is, one or more form publishers may upload forms or create forms using the forms wizard **120**. Routine **602** is described in greater detail with reference to FIG. 7A. Routine **602** is followed by step **604**, in which the forms engine **12** determined whether a form is to be updated. If a form is to be updated, the "YES" branch is followed to step **606**, in which the forms engine **12** updates a form. A form update may be implemented by replacing an existing form, creating a new form, or creating a change file for the updated form.

If a form is not to be updated, the "NO" branch is followed to step **608**, in which the forms engine **12** creates a report. This report may be uploaded by the form publisher or created using the reports wizard **122**. The forms engine **12** associates

the report with the form created in step **602**. Routine **608** is described in greater detail with reference to FIG. 8.

Routine **608** is followed by step **610**, in which the forms engine **12** determines whether a report is to be updated. If a report is to be updated, the "YES" branch is followed to step **612**, in which the forms engine **12** updates a report. A report update may be implemented by replacing an existing report, creating a new report, or creating a change file for the updated report.

If a report is not to be updated, the "NO" branch is followed to routine **614**, in which the forms engine **12** prompts the forms publisher **22** for the service definitions **29**. The service definitions **29** typically include form logic, a destination for delivering reports, instructions for report processing, submission handling criteria, payment criteria and method, and security criteria and methods. Routine **614** is described in greater detail with reference to FIG. 9.

Routine **614** is followed by step **616**, in which the forms engine determines whether the service definitions **29** are to be updated. If the service definitions **29** are to be updated, the "YES" branch is followed to step **618**, in which the forms engine **12** updates the service definitions. Service definitions **29** may be updated by replacing the existing service definitions, creating new service definitions, or creating a change file for the updated service definitions. If service definitions **29** are not to be updated, the "NO" branch is followed to routine **620**, in which the forms engine **12** performs submission handling. In the submission handling routine **620**, the forms engine receives and validates form submissions from visitors. Routine **620** is described in greater detail with reference to FIG. 10.

Routine **620** is followed by step **622**, in which the forms engine determines whether to generate a report. If a report is to be generated, the "YES" branch is followed to step **624**, in which the forms engine **12** generates and delivers the report in accordance with the service definition. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the forms handling system may be configured to perform a wide variety of sophisticated analyses on the data maintained in the database table **18** to produce

the report. Additionally, the publisher of the report may specify a variety of destinations for the report, such as storage on the forms handling system, e-mail delivery, voice delivery (voice reports), or hard copy delivery to a specified location.

If a report is not to be generated, the "NO" branch is followed to step **626**, in which the forms engine **12** determines whether to discontinue service. If service is not to be discontinued, the "NO" branch is followed to step **604** and the search engine processes another form. If the service is to be discontinued, the "YES" branch is followed to step **628**. In step **628**, the files are archived and deleted from the on-line system to free the system resources for use by other form publishers. Step **628** is followed by the "END" step, which concludes routine **600**.

FIG. 7A is a logic flow diagram illustrating form creation routine **602**. Routine **602** follows the "BEGIN" step shown on FIG. 6. In step **702**, the forms engine **12** determines whether a form is to be uploaded or created on-line with the assistance of the forms wizard **120**. If the form is to be created on-line with the assistance of the forms wizard **120**, the "NO" branch is followed to step **704**, in which the forms engine **12** causes the document handler **104** to launch a forms wizard **120**. The forms wizard **120** is a menu-driven utility designed to help users create forms. Step **704** is followed by step **706**, in which the forms wizard **120** prompts the form publisher to create the data entry form **14**. The data entry form **14** includes one or more data submission fields configured to receive visitor's input. FIG. 2 is an example of a data entry form that may be generated by the forms wizard **120**. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that numerous variations of the data entry forms can be created. The forms wizard **120** creates the form in a format supported by at least one of the application programs contained in the library **110**, as selected the form publisher **22**.

If a remote form publisher **22** uploads a form, the "YES" branch is followed from step **702** to step **708**. In step **708**, the document handler **104** receives the uploaded form. The form can be uploaded in a variety of formats, such as HTML, XML, PDF, or various word processor formats. The uploader **124** typically accepts any form created with a compatible version of one of the word processing or desktop

application programs included in the library **110**, assigns a URL-based location identifier to the form, and stores the form in the forms database **14**. The uploader **124** may query the form publisher to specify the desired URL based location identifier on the forms handling system server. If the form publisher is an existing customer of the forms handling system, the uploader **124** may optionally assign the URL based location identifier to the current form with the same URL based location identifier of that customer's previously published forms. In addition, the uploader **124** may convert a received form into a format supported one of the word processing or desktop application programs included in the library **110**. Steps **706** and **708** are followed by step **710**, in which the forms engine **12** determines the form's format.

In step **710**, the document handler **104** receives the form created by the forms wizard **120** or uploaded by the form publisher **22**. Now that the newly created form is in the forms handling system, the forms engine **12** analyzes the format of the form in order to choose the proper application that is needed to parse the form. Step **710** is followed by step **712**, in which the search engine **22** parses the form. When parsing, the search engine **22** extracts the input field names and the data submission field types. Submission field types include but are not limited to buttons, pick lists, check boxes, text lines, and text areas. Each submission field type has a corresponding database field type, such as integer, decimal, character, text, or date-time, supported by the database application program. Step **712** is followed by step **714**, in which the forms engine **22** retrieves the available database field types from the look-up table for each data submission field. FIG. 7B is an example of a look-up table that lists the submission form field types, the corresponding database field options, and the default database field types. Step **714** is followed by step **716**, in which the available options for the database field types for each submission field type is presented to the form publisher **22**. If the form publisher fails to select an option for a particular data submission field, the associated default database field type can be assigned. Step **716** is followed by step **718**, in which the forms engine **22** creates a database table associated with the created form. The forms engine **22** should create a storage

element in the database table corresponding to each data submission entry on the form. The format of each storage element has been previously defined by its assigned data field type. When a submission occurs, the forms engine **22** will add the submission entry data to the appropriate storage elements in database table.

5 FIG. 3 is an example of a database table that may be created by the forms engine **22**. In FIG. 3, the columns represent the storage elements that receive the corresponding form data upon each submission.

Step **718** is followed by step **720**, in which the forms publisher **22** is prompted to specify the form logic for the various data submission fields, such as data types and ranges. Additionally, the form publisher **22** may include logic for the form submission, such as the required fields. Step **720** is followed by step **722**, in which the forms engine **22** stores the form logic corresponding to the data entry fields in the database table associated with the that form. Step **722** is followed by step **724**, in which the forms engine **22** obtains filler data from the forms publisher and populates the storage elements of the table with filler data.

Step **724** is followed by step **726**. In step **726**, the forms engine may determine a location on the server to store the form if a URL location identifier was not assigned by the uploader **124** (see step **708**). If not previously assigned, the forms engine **22** assigns a URL location identifier to the current form. The forms engine **22** may query the form publisher to specify the desired URL based location identifier on the forms handling system server. If the form publisher is an existing customer of the forms handling system, the forms engine **22** may automatically assign the URL based location identifier for the current form with the same URL based location identifier of that customer's previously published forms. Step **726** is followed by step **728**, in which the form is published for access and is able to receive submissions by visitors. After step **728**, the routine returns to step 604 of FIG. 6.

FIG. 7B illustrates an example of a correlation table **740** for associating form field types **742** with database field types **746** in an automatic forms handling system. The table also contains default database field types **744** for each submission field

type **742**. In this example, the submission form field type of a "BUTON" **748** has an associated database field options of "INTEGER" or "DECIMAL." If the form publisher does not choose a database field type, the default "INTEGER" field type will be assigned. Similarly, the submission form field type of a "PICK LIST" **750** has an associated database field options of "INTEGER" or "DECIMAL." If the form publisher does not choose a database field type, the default "INTEGER" field type will be assigned. Likewise, the submission form field type of a "CHECK BOX" **752** has an associated database field options of "INTEGER" or "DECIMAL." If the form publisher does not choose a database field type, the default "INTEGER" field type will be assigned. And again, the submission form field type of a "TEXT LINE" **754** has an associated database field options of "CHARACTER," "TEXT," or "DATE-TIME." If the form publisher does not choose a database field type, the default "WORD" field type will be assigned. The correlation table will list the various other possible submission form field types and corresponding database field types and defaults. In this example, the last submission form field type is "TEXT AREA" **756**. The submission form field type of "TEXT AREA" **756** has an associated database field options of "CHARACTER," "TEXT," or "DATE-TIME." If the form publisher does not choose a database field type, the default "FREE TEXT" field type will be assigned. It will be understood that the table could include a wide variety of form field types and associated database field types in addition to those illustrated.

FIG. 8 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a report creation routine **608**. Routine **608** follows steps **604** or **606** shown on FIG. 6. In step **802**, the forms engine **12** determines whether a report is to be uploaded or created by a forms wizard. If the forms publisher **22** does not upload a report, the "NO" branch is followed to step **804**, in which the document handler **104** launches a reports wizard **122**. The reports wizard **122** is an on-line menu-driven utility designed to help users create reports. Step **804** is followed by step **806**, in which the reports wizard **122** prompts the form publisher **22** for the report specifications. The report specifications describe the relationships between the various data submission fields in the form and the report

elements in the associated report. The report specifications can include a title for each report table, the label associated with each report element, and the format desired for each report element.

If a remote form publisher **22** uploads the report, the "YES" branch is followed from step **802** to step **808**. In step **808**, the document handler **104** receives the uploaded report. The report can be uploaded in a variety of formats which typically include HTML, XML, PDF, or various word processor formats. Step **808** is followed by step **810**, in which the uploader **126** analyzes the report to determine the report type. If the report is uploaded in format that is not supported by one of the applications in the library **110**, the uploader **126** uses a conversion utility to convert the report into a format that is supported by the library **110**.

Step **810** is followed by step **812**, in which the form publisher is prompted to specify the report logic. The report logic stipulates how to manipulate the storage elements to create the various report elements. The manipulation of the storage elements can vary from simple averaging to complex statistical analysis. The report also may require graphical data representations, pie charts, animation, and so forth. Step **812** is followed by step **814**, in which the forms engine correlates the report elements with storage elements for the associated form. Step **814** is followed by step **816**, in which the forms engine saves the form logic and the form logic table correlation in the database table for the associated form.

Step **814** is followed by step **816**, in which the forms engine renders the report. When rendering the report, all of the required storage elements manipulations are performed and the data is presented as per the form publisher's specifications. Step **816** is followed by step **818**, in which the forms engine allocates storage area on the server and designates a URL location identifier to enable the form publisher to access the report. Step **818** is followed by step **820**, in which the reports is delivered to the form publisher by any of various means. The report may be stored on the forms handling system server, e-mailed to the form publisher, a hard copy may be mailed to

a specified location, or any other delivery method specified by the forms publisher **22**. After step **822**, the routine return to step **610** of FIG. 6.

FIG. 9 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a service definition routine **614**. Routine **614** follows steps **610** or **612** shown in FIG. 6. In step **902**, the forms engine **12** prompts the form publisher **22** for the report destination. Many options exist for the delivery of the report. The report may remain on the forms handling system and located by an URL generated by the forms engine **12**. The report may be e-mailed, a hard copy may be delivered, or the report may be delivered on a digital storage device. Other methods than those listed can be used to deliver the report to the form publisher.

Step **902** is followed by step **904**, in which the forms engine prompts **12** the form publisher for the report delivery criteria. Typical criteria may include requirements to generate the report after a preset number of visitor submissions, after a set time period like monthly, after the sum of a storage element reaches a preset limit, or after the form publisher **22** calls or uses the Internet to request a report. Obviously, the form publisher may specify a wide spectrum of criteria for when the forms handling system should generate a report.

Step **904** is followed by step **906**, in which the forms engine prompts the form publisher **22** for the submission handling criteria. The form publisher may specify that the form engine does not record a submission if that particular visitor has previously entered a submission. Similarly, the forms publisher may specify that the forms engine should not record a submission unless certain data entry fields satisfy preset values like the visitor owns a certain brand of automobile with a household income exceeding fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000). The form publisher may desire to pre-approve all submissions. In this case, the forms handling system will e-mail the submission data or otherwise notify the form publisher and only record the submission upon approval. During the submission screening, the form publisher can modify data before it gets recorded to fix minor problems instead of discarding the submissions. Additionally, the form publisher may add private notations or other

desired information to the submission. And again, the form publisher **22** may specify a wide range of submission criteria before the forms engine records the visitor's submission..

Step **906** is followed by step **908**, in which the forms engine **12** prompts the form publisher **22** for the payment criteria and method. Naturally, many payment plans and payment methods can be instituted for providing the forms handling system services. The form publisher **22** may be billed monthly, for each report generated, for every preset number of visitor that submit submissions, or any other mutually agreed method.

Step **908** is followed by step **910**, in which the forms engine prompts the form publisher **22** for the security criteria and method. Most form publisher will want to control who may access the information or who may request updates to the forms or reports. The forms handling system will be equipped to handle authentication, encryption, and other security requirements of the form publisher.

Step **910** is followed by step **912**, in which the forms engine saves the service definition as metadata in the database table associated with that form. After saving the metadata, the system returns to step **616** of FIG. 6.

FIG. 10 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a submission handling routine **620**. Routine **620** follows steps **616** or **618** shown in FIG. 6. In step **1002**, the forms handling system logs in the visitor to the system's server. Step **1002** is followed by step **1004**, in which the visitor identity is verified, and the visitor is enabled to access the forms. The visitor identity may be verified by the use of passwords, personal data, HTTP cookies, digital, certificates, or by other means specified by the form publisher **22**.

Step **1004** is followed by step **1006**, in which the forms engine receives the form data entered by the visitor. Step **1006** is followed by step **1008**, in which the forms engine applies the required logic to each data entry field. Step **1008** is followed by step **1010**, in which the search engine determines if the data entered was a valid entry.

If the data entered was not valid, the "NO" branch is followed to step **1012**, in which the retry limit for a data entry is queried. If the retry limit has not been reached, the "NO" branch of step **1012** is followed to step **1014**. In step **1014**, the forms engine displays a correction prompt and the data entry field is enabled to accept the corrected data. Step **1014** is followed by step **1006**, in which the corrected data entry is received by the forms engine. If the retry limit has been reached, the "YES" branch is followed from step **1012** to step **1016**. In step **1016**, the forms engine displays the applicable error message. After step **1016**, the routine returns to step **622** of FIG. 6. If the data entered was valid, the "YES" branch is followed from step **1010** to step **1018**. In step **1018**, the forms engine accepts the data entry and proceeds to step **1020**. In step **1020**, the forms engine checks to see if the submit the data command has tendered.

If the submit the data command has not been tendered, the "NO" branch is followed from step **1020** to step **1006**. In step **1006**, the forms engine receives another data entry. If the submit the data command has been tendered, the "YES" branch is followed from step **1020** to step **1022**. In step **1022**, the forms engine applies the specified form logic for the form submission. Step **1022** is followed by step **1024**, in which the forms engine determines if the criteria has been met for a valid submission.

If a valid submission criteria has not been met, the "NO" branch of step **1024** is followed to step **1026**. In step **1026**, the forms engines determines whether the retry limit for a valid submission has been reached. If the submission retry limit has not been met, the "NO" branch of step **1026** is followed to step **1014**, in which a correction prompt is displayed. Step **1014** is followed by step **1006**, in which a corrected data entry is received form the visitor. If the submission retry limit has been exceeded, the "YES" branch of step **1026** is followed to step **1016**. In step **1016**, an error message is displayed about the retry limit for a valid submission has been exceeded. After step **1016**, the routine continues to step **622** of FIG. 6.

If the submission was valid, the "YES" branch of step **1024** is followed to routine **1028**, in which the forms engine processes the submission. Routine **1028** is described in greater detail with reference to FIG. 11. Routine **1028** is followed by step **1030**, in which the forms engine displays a message stating the submission has been accepted. Following step **1030**, the routine returns to step **622** of FIG. 6.

FIG. 11 is a logic flow diagram illustrating a submission processing routine **1028**. Routine **1028** follows step **1024** shown in FIG. 10. In step **1102**, the forms engine queries the metadata of the database table to determine if the form publisher **22** review is required before recording the data submission. If the form publisher **22** review is not required, the "NO" branch of step **1102** is followed to step **1110**. In step **1110**, the forms engine proceeds to record the submission into the database table that corresponds to the published form. After step **1110**, the routine returns to step **1032** of FIG. 10. If the form publisher **22** review is required, the "YES" branch of step **1102** is followed to step **1104**. In step **1104**, the submission data is e-mailed to the form publisher **22** for review. Step **1104** is followed by step **1106**, in which the forms engine **12** determines if the form publisher **22** has approved the data submission for recordation.

If the form publisher **22** has approved the data submission, the "YES" branch of step **1106** is followed to step **1110**. In step **1110**, the forms engine proceeds to record the submission into the database table that corresponds to the published form. After step **1110**, the routine returns to step **1032** of FIG. 10. If the form publisher **22** has not approved the data submission, the "NO" branch of step **1106** is followed to step **1108**. In step **1108**, the forms engine determines whether a revised submission has been received. If a revised submission has not been received, the "NO" branch is followed, and the routine returns to step **1032** of FIG. 10. If a revised submission has been received, the "YES" branch is followed to step **1110**. In step **1110**, the forms engine proceeds to record the revised submission into the database table that corresponds to the published form being utilized. After step **1110**, the routine returns to step **1032** of FIG. 10.

In view of the foregoing, it will be appreciated that the invention provides an advantageous forms administration system. It should be understood that the foregoing relates only to the illustrated embodiments of the invention, and that numerous changes may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope

5 of the invention as defined by the following claims.